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ABSTRACT

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Framing Youth Violence

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Abstract

Have quality newspapers incorporated what we've learned over the last quarter century about making news more useful as a resource for civic participation? A yearlong analysis of reporting about youth violence provides a schizophrenic conclusion: After the Columbine massacre, newspapers provided rich context, a wide range of sources and many frames offering causes and solutions. But coverage of the more common violence that most threatens society was typically frameless , minimally contextualized, and police-sourced.

Keywords: youth, violence, crime news, framing, content analysis, sense-making, newspaper journalism, reporting.

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Framing Youth Violence

During the last quarter of the final century of the millennium we learned a lot about how audiences make sense of news to form mental constructs of important features of their environment: News frames are powerful in making certain elements of issues and events available for mental processing and not others. The level of context matters a good deal in sense-making. Terse episodic reporting throws readers and viewers back on their own pre-conceptions about why events take place. Some frames appear to promote a political or social reaction while others elicit apathy.

The present study explores whether quality newspapers have incorporated these findings about how to make information more useful as a resource for civic participation.

We focused on the portrayal of violence involving youth in three large California newspapers with varying, but generally good, reputations for quality. Violence attracted our attention because Americans have consistently ranked it at or near the top of their concerns over the last 20 years, and because "law and order" has been an area of intense political interest. Youth have been a focus of new criminal laws. Youth also interested us because we thought if environmental contributions to crime would appear in any reporting, it would show up in the coverage of impressionable and immature perpetrators.

Numerous studies have documented the media's preoccupation with crime reporting--particularly focusing on juveniles-- even while crime rates have been declining.[1] These portrayals of youth violence may have powerful political effects; 44 states and the District of Columbia adopted tougher juvenile sentencing laws from 1992-97.[2] A grant dictated California as the locus of the study. But in addition to being the

most populous state, California has a reputation for being where American popular culture is invented. We selected three large newspapers—one in the state capital, and the largest circulation papers in northern and southern California--thinking they might be likely places to find the best in journalistic practice because of their great resources. Although fewer Americans are reading them than a decade ago, newspapers are still the standard-bearers of journalism and often set the agenda for broadcast news.

Violence reporting circa 1976

In January 1976, Graber launched a comprehensive study of violence reporting. She examined news content for one year in three mid-western newspapers, a small paper in New England, network newscasts and local television news. She found crime/justice was a major story across all media. It averaged 25% of all stories in the newspapers, somewhat less in television. Most stories appeared to have been taken almost verbatim from the police blotter with little context. The great majority of stories were episodic—accounts of single incidents—rather than thematic—stories emphasizing issues or connections and patterns among events. "One seldom finds interpretive analyses that place criminal justice system information into historical, sociological or political perspective," she wrote. [3]

"What" trumped "why" in this coverage. Only 5% of all crime stories discussed causes. Of those, "curable deficiencies in the existing criminal justice system (mostly making it more punitive) and personality defects in individuals are depicted by the media as the main causes of rampant crime. Social causes play a subordinate, though by no means non-existent, role". [4] Only 3% of all stories mentioned solutions. "Suggested remedies are sparse and do not generally include social reforms," she noted.[5]

What have we learned about presenting news?

It might be helpful to begin with a theory of how people make sense of the news. Price and Tewksbury [6] weave together several efforts to understand how news affects formation of politically-relevant opinions: agenda-setting, framing, and priming. "Fundamentally, these approaches all suggest that the news can help determine what knowledge is activated when people are called to make politically relevant judgments".[7]

Here's the short version of their model: At any given time people have a store of information built up over time from direct experience and from mediated and personal messages. They call upon this store to make sense of issues and events in the news. But like a computer with limited memory, people can only keep so much information in mind.

Two criteria determine which information in the store will be used for processing. The first is what's most readily available--what's already in mind or has been recently stored. The second is information the individual deems most relevant to the topic she is considering. Thus the information that's both most accessible and most relevant has the greatest chance of active processing into a political opinion. Information left in the background is less likely to be incorporated.

According to Price and Tewksbury, how an article is framed by reporters may have a significant effect on the sense readers make of it. For them, "a framing effect is one in which salient attributes of a message (its organization, selection of content, or thematic structure) render particular thoughts applicable, resulting in their activation and use in evaluations".[8] This doesn't mean that the writer's points of view will be adopted by the reader, however, only that they will be considered.

Framing effects can be very powerful. Before the March 2000 primary election in California, the Field Institute read accounts of a political ballot initiative to likely voters and then asked whether they were for or against it. In certain counties a short summary of the proposition was read; in others pollsters read a somewhat longer version. When interviewers said: "Proposition 21 provides changes for juvenile felonies--increasing penalties, changing trial procedures and required reporting" likely voters said they *opposed* it by a 47-30 margin. But when the following phrase was added--"the Juvenile Crime Initiative increases punishment for gang-related felonies, home invasion robbery, car-jacking, witness intimidations and drive-by shootings, and creates a crime of gang-recruitment activities"--likely voters *favored* it by a 55-32 margin.[9] A simple expansion of the wording--containing frames of youth violence-- made a 40 point difference in public opinion!

The example suggests that Americans, at least Californians, have sparsely stocked stores of information about political issues. (At the time of the Field Poll, the Secretary of State had already mailed detailed descriptions of Prop. 21 to registered voters. Yet many were greatly swayed by the framing of the pollster's question.) According to the Price and Tewksbury model, a lack of information with which to process the incoming message leaves people particularly vulnerable to the frames embedded in the new message.

Iyengar found that Americans indeed have low levels of political awareness and information.[10] He put most of the blame on the structure of news reporting, particularly in television. Television news, he found, deprives Americans of the kinds of frames they most need to make sense of political questions--frames that assign responsibility for social ills and suggest remedies.

> By portraying issues primarily as discrete events or instances, television news impedes recognition of the interconnections between issues and thus contributes to the absence of ideological constraint or consistency in American public opinion. In the same way, television's unswerving focus on specific episodes, individual perpetrators, victims or other actors at the expense of more general, thematic information inhibits the attribution of political responsibility to societal factors and to the actions of politicians.... [11]

Gamson conducted extensive focus groups among working class Bostonians trying to discover what kinds of news frames excite civic participation.[12] To get to "hot," or emotional, public cognitions, stories need specifics, but to motivate real change those specifics have to be linked to more abstract systemic analysis, Gamson found. Yet the narrative structure of much news tends to emphasize human actors and drama rather than analysis of socio-cultural causes. "If people simply relied on the media, it would be difficult to find any coherent frame at all...".[13]

Neuman, Just and Crigler also asked people how they make sense of news. Their content analyses again revealed an emphasis on episodic reporting and an absence of cause and solution frames. The paucity of such frames led to a sense of public powerlessness and apathy.[14]

Researchers focusing on crime reporting reached similar conclusions. Best found that news media "tend to view crime as a melodrama in which evil villains prey on innocent victims".[15] Episodic reports emphasizing violence contribute to civic paralysis, he argued. "Defining violence as patternless not only discourages us from searching for and identifying patterns; it keeps us from devising social policies to address those problems".[16] Coleman and Thorson demonstrated that "embedding public health information [which implicates environmental causes of crime over individual] into stories

can change readers' attributions of responsibility. Attitudes become more critical of society's role in crime and violence rather than simply focusing on the individual's role."[17]

Chermak found that "the newsworthiness of...crime increases significantly if members of the family weep on camera, provide a descriptive photograph, or express their pain dramatically in words."[18] Dorfman and colleagues analyzed the content of local TV news about violence in California and found that only one story of the nearly 1,800 analyzed had a public health frame--emphasizing social causes rather than just individual responsibility.[19] Sneed concluded: "journalists tend to present crime in an atomistic, ahistorical and decontextualized way, through a host of snippets and snapshots."[20]

What do do? The research exhibits a central tendency. Graber urged greater depth and context in covering individual crimes as well as more systematic reporting about the justice system. People can't be counted on to assemble all the discrete accounts of crime into meaningful patterns by themselves. Iyengar also advocated more thematic reporting and less episodic coverage. That reporting should emphasize the causes of crime--beyond simply the personal choice of the perpetrator--and solutions. Gamson wrote that more thematic reporting is necessary to develop frames of injustice, rather than merely episodes of personal tragedy. He encouraged frames that identify who and what are responsible and frames that suggest something can be done. Neuman, Just and Crigler recommended reporting from multiple perspectives, rather than relying so heavily on police and attorneys, and adding historical and economic perspective. They especially encouraged coverage of proposed solutions. Journalists, such as Stevens, argued for a public health orientation to reporting--treating violence as a disease with definable causes that can be eliminated or lessened if society chooses.[21] Price and Tewksbury offer hope

that people's store of knowledge can grow and gain greater coherence in response to such reporting. That should enable more informed political decision-making.

Research Questions

Based on this literature, we began with several general questions: (1) What proportion of prominently displayed stories concerned violence? (2) What proportion of these stories concerned youth? (3) What proportion of violence stories concerned youth?

Next we turned to how youth violence (YV) stories were framed, examining both structure and content: (4) What proportion of YV stories were primarily episodic vs. primarily thematic? (5) Which YV frames appeared in the most stories, and which were absent or appeared in the fewest? (6, 7 and 8) What proportion of YV stories contained frames of cause? Of solution? Frames describing the nature of the problem?

Finally, we measured the level of context in reports that focused on an episode of youth violence, as well as which sources the media favored or shunned. (9) In what proportion of stories did various contextual items (from a list described below) appear in episodic reports of YV? (10) Which sources were represented in the most and fewest YV stories?

Method

Following Gamson's hypothesis that framing is particularly active after a "critical discourse event," we created two samples. In the first we examined one issue each of the *Sacramento Bee, Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* every 13 days for a year from June, 1998 to May, 1999. In the second, we sampled every issue during the seven days in April following the Columbine High School massacre--the bloodiest incident of youth violence the nation experienced in more than 50 years. The yearlong

sample followed a "constructed week" design. This assures equal numbers of fat Sunday editions and thin Monday papers while avoiding a sample dominated by an unusual event (such as Columbine). Such a design provides the best overall picture of reporting available with a particular sample size.[22] The two samples allowed us to test Gamson's hypothesis and provided a contrast between reporting under routine crime conditions and an extraordinary one. (The two samples did not overlap, although one edition in the yearlong sample fell in the second week after the Columbine tragedy, and did contain stories about the incident.)

We reasoned that readers pay more attention to prominently displayed stories and those promoted on section fronts, and that journalists put their best out front. So we analyzed "featured" news stories--every article that began or was "teased" on the front page, the local/metro news front page, the front of the lifestyle section and the first page of any inserted weekly local news sections. We also included "sidebars" of display page stories--adjacent articles about the same topic on an inside page. Finally, we examined editorials and op-ed columns. Business, sports, travel, automotive, computer, real estate and other specialty sections were excluded because they rarely contain violent crime stories. Overall, we analyzed 3,174 articles. Of these, 638 comprised the week-long post-Columbine sample and 2,536 comprised the yearlong sample.

Definitions

Given our focus on youth and violence in the United States, we excluded international stories. For domestic stories we defined violence and youth broadly.

A story was considered about *violence* if it described a deliberate physical attack on a person or property, including violence to self and self-defense, or a written or verbal

threat of bodily harm. We also included violence-related issues: police and judicial efforts to bring suspects of violence to justice, stories about violence's cause, prevention, nature, extent, effects, or remedies including the penal system and political issues such as gun control. To be counted as a violence story, one-third or more of the first half of the article's text had to concern violence.

Youth was defined as any person 24 or younger.[23] A story was categorized as about youth if at least one-third of the text concerned youth or youth-related issues, such as schools, summer camps, child support, lead poisoning, child care, etc.

Thematic reporting scrutinizes the big picture, examining connections between events, looking for trends, emphasizing the "why" and "how." All articles about *issues* such as gun control or sentencing reform were coded as thematic even if they occurred within the context of a meeting--an event. *Episodic* reporting, in contrast, focuses on a single event. It's a snapshot of "what" happened, reporting at the micro level. A single story may contain elements of both approaches; however the one which predominates in terms of column inches determined the classification. If the two were equal, we considered the story to be thematic.

We relied on Entman's definition of *framing* as two related processes: selecting and highlighting.[24] "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation."[25] We divided content frames into three general categories: those describing a necessary, sufficient or contributing cause of violence. Those describing solutions. And those diagnosing the nature of the problem. Frames could have a positive

or negative valence. For example, the solution frame "limiting access to firearms would reduce violence" could have a negative valence if stated as, "Gun control is not the answer," or "If more people were armed, criminals would think twice about committing violence."

For episodic stories, we measured the degree of *context*. We looked for 17 elements that might help readers make sense of a violent incident.[26] They included type of weapon used, how it was obtained, relationship of the perpetrator and victim, frequency of that type of violence in the community, evidence of gang membership, racism/hate, presence of drugs or alcohol, costs of the violence to victims/family/police/courts/public hospitals, costs of incarceration, etc. Rather than just note their presence or absence in the story, we examined whether reporters *inquired* about them. Thus the statement "police were unable to determine whether the suspect had been drinking" counted as much as reporting that the suspect was or wasn't imbibing.

Results

Prevalence of stories about violence, youth, and youth violence

Contrary to older research, we did not find a high proportion of featured stories about violence in the yearlong sample. Of 2,536 stories analyzed over the year, 9% concerned violence.[27] Graber's 1976 study found "crime and justice" topics comprised 25% of the news in Chicago's daily newspapers.[28]

More stories--14%--concerned youth than violence. When writing about youth, journalists most often focused on education; 26% of all youth stories concerned kindergarten through high school education with another 8% about college. Violence placed a strong second, however, with 25%. No other topic hit double figures.

Stories concerned with *both* youth and violence comprised only 4% of the yearlong sample. Of course in the week following Columbine, youth violence became the dominant story. But this week was highly atypical; it's not appropriate to compare it with past research over extended periods.

Frame Analysis

Routinely, these three quality California dailies framed violence as having no cause. A did violence to B or took B's property. The *why* is apparently assumed to be self-evident. Solutions and ways of describing the nature of the problem--other than shocking or distressing--were also rare. Episodic stories outnumbered thematic, three to one.

But a spectacular incident of youth violence--Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' murderous and suicidal rampage that left 15 dead--utterly transformed these same news organizations. Suddenly, the cause of a crime became newsworthy, and often, complex. The shooters were described as socially isolated by their own behavior and that of others. They were harassed by peers and sought revenge. Years of mediated images of violence—often rewarded and shown with no negative consequences— distorted the perpetrators' sense of reality. They got no psychological help. Their parents failed to supervise and help the two young men fit in. Their rebellious clique urged them in anti-social directions. Guns made them feel powerful. Access to firearms enabled them to turn their twisted fantasies into reality. Living in a culture where violence is often the first, rather than last, resort, Harris and Klebold made a personal choice. Rather than being an intractable problem we just have to live with, solutions were possible: Enacting laws restricting access to guns; Finding ways for adults to get in touch with the young people

in a community; Identifying and treating children who show early signs of violent behavior. Simply hiring more cops or lengthening prison terms were not portrayed as adequate deterrents.

Structural frames

In the yearlong sample, which recorded routine incidents of youth crime, about two-thirds of the articles in the three newspapers were structured predominantly as episodes--discrete events. About one-third were treated thematically--as issues. These results are very similar to Graber's results in the mid-70s. She found a 69-31% split favoring episodic reporting in the *Chicago Tribune*.

But after Columbine, the ratio flips. Sixty percent of the stories in the week following the shootings were predominantly thematic in character. In fact, these percentages understate the contrast. The Columbine coverage was so extensive that each day's reporting was broken up into three or four stories--perhaps one on the on-going investigation, another on tensions between high school cliques, and a third on the socialization of young men. Were these combined into one large story, a somewhat higher proportion would have met thematic standards.

Percent of Stories Treated Thematically v. Episodically[29]

Type of Frame	Yearlong sample	Post-Columbine
Thematic	35	60
Episodic	65	40

Content frames

Six in ten of the youth violence stories in the yearlong sample contained at least one frame of cause, solution or nature of the problem. However, the proportion drops below half--to 45%--if only frames of cause or solution are considered. These are the

most important frames according to the literature. And if just the news reporting is considered--the editorials and op-ed columns are excluded--only one in three stories contain either cause or remedy frames.

But after the critical discourse incident of Columbine, as Gamson hypothesized, the reporting exploded with frames. That week fully 82% of all youth violence articles contained at least one frame; 67% carried causal or solution frames. Even if opinion articles were excluded leaving just news reports, 60% still contained these crucial frames.

These numbers seriously underestimate the proportion of frame-bearing stories compared to the yearlong sample, however. In the week following Columbine, coverage of the tragedy was so voluminous, stories were divided by theme. Were "sidebar" stories on the tragedy combined into a single story, frames would have appeared in virtually every story. By contrast, very few stories in the yearlong sample carried sidebars. After Columbine, "why?" and "what can we do about it?" suddenly became important questions in the press, rather than taken for granted as they were in the majority of articles during the rest of the year.

Causal frames

In the *yearlong sample*, fewer than one in three stories (29%) contained any causal frame. The most common was access to guns. It appeared in 7% of youth violence stories. Only three other frames were offered as frequently as one story in 20: peer pressure from within a group; isolation from and harassment by peers; and individual psychological disturbance. Still, these results show substantial improvement from Graber's finding a quarter of a century ago that 5% of violence stories contained frames of causality.

In the *post-Columbine sample*, however, 54% of all youth violence stories had at last one causal frame. Compared to the yearlong sample, the number of causal frames mentioned in 5% or more of the stories tripled, from four to 12. The most frequent causal frame was peer isolation and harassment; 29% of the stories blamed this behavior. Watching violent TV, movies and video games was mentioned as a cause in 20% of the stories. Close behind at 18% came poor parenting and psychological disturbance. Next most frequent were access to guns, peer pressure from a group, and erosion of social mores coupled with the rise of a culture of violence and guns.

Most Common Causal Frames[30]

In the Year-long Sample		**In the Columbine Sample**	
Frame	% of stories	Frame	% of stories
Access to guns	7	Peer isolation/harassment	29
Peer pressure from group	6	Media violence	20
Peer isolation/harassment	6	Poor parenting	18
Psychological disturbance	5	Psychological disturbance	18
		Access to guns	15
		Peer pressure from group	12
		Value erosion/culture of violence	11
		Not media violence	6
		Not value erosion/culture of violence	6
		Isolation from adults	5
		Not group peer pressure	5
		Not psychological	5

Descriptions and examples of prevalent causal frames

Access to guns: Most often proponents of this frame acknowledged that the perpetrator might have done some harm without the gun, but that the gun multiplied the damage. Sometimes, however, this frame is advanced in a more powerful form: that without a gun the perpetrator would have been either unable to inflict harm or would not even have considered it. An example: "On the radio I heard a disc jockey wonder if the Colorado school tragedy was somehow the result of day care—parents working too

much. I heard another person say something about the Gothic cult and the Internet.... Pick your theory. The fact remains that we may never know what caused two kids to go so berserk. We do know that no matter what influenced them, they had guns. This is how they did the killing"—*Sacramento Bee*, syndicated column, 4/26/99.

Peer pressure from group: The influence of other members of a group, particularly an extremist group, steers an individual towards violence. In its weakest form such pressure is one among many influences. In its strongest, peer expectations overcome the judgment of the individual and cause behavior that would never have occurred absent the group's sway. An example: "You are steeped in the occult; you are reading about the occult. You are sucking so much of this in, it's a huge indoctrination" –*San Francisco Chronicle,* news item, 4/21/99.

Peer isolation/harassment: This frame was the inverse of the preceding one. The perpetrator is outside the mainstream and subject to its exclusion and ridicule. The perpetrator may also suffer personal attack, humiliation or racism. These create a revenge motive, or perhaps even a justice motive, that drives the perpetrator's behavior. This frame ranges from a contributing cause to a sufficient cause of violence. An example: "They (Harris and Klebold) were described by dozens of people as outcasts, loners, social misfits shunned by most of their classmates. Meaning, they neatly fit the profiles of suspects in shooting sprees from Paducah, Ky. to Jonesboro, Ark., to Pearl, Miss. Disaffected boys, out to avenge social slights" – *Los Angeles Times*, editorial, 4/21/99.

Violent media images: This frame had several variations. One was based in social learning theory: exposure of children to violent acts in movies, on television and in video games in which a heroic figure triumphs through force predisposes at least some youth to

use violence to settle their differences. If the mediated violence is shown without consequences—realistic pain and suffering on the part of the victim—some youth also fail to take the consequences of violence seriously. A second variant held that the sheer volume of violent programming and the emphasis on gore and special effects numbs young people to the real horror of violence. These frames are normally provided by social scientists, rather than police or lay persons, and couched in research results. An example: "In fact, study after study indicate that children exposed to media violence are more prone to commit or approve of violent acts"—*Sacramento Bee*, op-ed., 4/23/99.

Poor parenting: Two variations dominated. In the first and most common, parents neglect their children, too busy with their own lives to provide proper supervision. In the second, parents fail to raise children with appropriate respect for authority and for others. An example: "I'd like to think I would have known if my teenage son were collecting guns and building bombs, amassing an arsenal grand enough to blow his school to kingdom come"—*Los Angeles Times*, column, 4/27/99.

Psychological disturbance: This frame argued that a small number of children are psychologically impaired either from nature or nurture. Without treatment, such mental imbalance leads youth to commit violence. An example: "People have difficulty recognizing mental illness in general, but especially in adolescents and children, because there are such moralizing attitudes toward mental problems. They don't want to describe kids like the ones in Littleton as, say, paranoid or sadistic. They're afraid to even use the terms"—*Los Angeles Times*, column, 5/6/99.

Solution frames

Frames prescribing some remedy to the problem of youth violence were slightly more common than causal frames in the yearlong sample. Thirty-one percent of stories contained at least one solution frame. The most often cited was greater law enforcement, mentioned in 8% of stories. No other solution was provided in 5% or more of the stories. Solution frames were much more common in our sample than in Graber's mid-70s sample. She found only 3% of stories had solution frames.

As with causal frames, the frequency of solution frames jumped after the Columbine incident; 45% of stories contained at least one solution frame. And rather than just "greater law enforcement," a variety of remedies were proposed. Eight frames were present in at least 5% of the stories. The most common were gun control, present in 19% of the stories, followed by more adult-youth contact/better parenting, at 16%. Prosecution of parents was a remedy suggested in 8% of stories, followed by reducing media violence, violence prevention education, the negative of gun control (e.g. expanding gun ownership), and greater law enforcement.

Most Common Solution Frames[31]

In Year-long Sample		**In the Columbine sample**	
Frame	% of stories	Frame	% of stories
Greater law enforcement	8	Gun control	19
		More adult-youth contact/parenting	16
		Treat at-risk kids	8
		Prosecute parents	7
		Reduce media violence	6
		Violence prevention education	6
		Not gun control	6
		Greater law enforcement	5

Descriptions and examples of prevalent solution frames

Gun Control: This frame advocated some level, beyond the present, of controlling access to firearms or adding safety features. An example: "...if it had been just a little more difficult for them to get their hands on a rifle, a pistol and two shotguns and ammunition, Columbine might not have been the hell it was in those fateful hours, Tuesday"—*Los Angeles Times*, editorial, 4/23/99.

More adult-youth contact, including better parenting: One key to preventing violence was communication and time spent between youths and adults—parents, teachers and coaches, and members of the community. An example: "I don't think it solves anything to 'blame it on the crazies' or other excuses. It takes an involved community to educate a healthy child"—*San Francisco Chronicle*, editorial, 4/22/99.

Nature of the problem frames

In the yearlong sample, these frames were as common as causal frames; 29% of stories contained at least one.[32] The only nature of the problem frame mentioned in more than 5% of stories was a sympathy frame: the violence is very shocking or distressing. In the Columbine sample, the same frame was again the only frequent one, appearing in 41% of the stories. As with other frames, the splitting of stories into sidebars, renders this number a substantial underestimate when compared with the yearlong sample. An example: "With the initial shock worn down by four days of tears and rage, the residents of this town yesterday finally began the hard work of looking deep into their hearts for lasting comfort—and they found little"—*San Francisco Chronicle,* news item, 4/24/99.

How much context accompanies youth violence stories?

We compared each story describing a violent act with a list of contextual items derived from epidemiological literature, e.g., type of violence, frequency of that type in the community, relationship between the perpetrator and victim, weapon type, how the weapon was obtained, etc. Obviously, not all of these details are relevant or available for every violent act reported in the paper.[33] If the perpetrator is unknown, for example, little can be said about him or her. So we did not include context items inappropriate to the particular circumstances of the event in our analysis. We also credited stories for any context item we could tell reporters inquired about, even if they were unable to get answers.

The newspapers scored very well on several context items in the yearlong sample. The relationship between actor and perpetrator was mentioned in 91% of the stories, and 93% noted the type of violence and weapon used. More than half of the stories mentioned whether or not there were gang influences, and the perpetrator's employment status. No other contextual items were mentioned in half or more of the stories where they could have been reported.

Given that 21% of violent offenders may be under the influence of alcohol and 12% high on drugs at the time of the incident, we were surprised at how infrequently journalists reported on these prominent risk factors: Only 14% of stories for alcohol, 9% for drugs.[34] The baseline frequency of a particular type of violence in the community was also rare--reported in only 19% of stories. Although we know that the poor are victimized more frequently than affluent Americans, the socio-economic status of perpetrators or

victims (revealed by parents' occupations, neighborhood, etc.) was mentioned in less than 30% of stories.

Race also correlates with youth violence.[35] However, many newsrooms now discourage ethnic and racial descriptors unless they are clearly relevant to the story, such as in a hate crime or description of a fugitive. The race of perpetrators or victims was mentioned in 39% of stories.

The cost of violence rarely appeared in the yearlong sample, with one exception: The emotional cost or trauma of the event. Although many states spend as much or more of their budgets on prisons as higher education, the cost of incarceration was mentioned in only 1% of stories. Police costs were not mentioned at all; court costs, in only 1% of stories. Ditto for medical costs, and loss of family income. Violence was portrayed as saddening its victims, but not affecting our pocketbooks.

In contrast, every day of the Columbine coverage was full of context. Entire stories addressed how the two teens could have acquired semi-automatic weapons and learned to make bombs. Other stories detailed the biographies of the two shooters—their employment, previous scrapes with authority, their grades in school, their well-off parents, their fascination with Hitler. Columns of print were spent on whether the two were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or had a history of use. Race played a prominent part in coverage, as did gender and the popularity or athletic prowess of some victims. Reporters were at pains to place the violence in relation to other school murders. However, costs, other than emotional trauma, were rarely discussed.

Context Items in the Yearlong Sample[36]

Context element	% of stories in which mentioned
Type of violence	93
Weapon type	93
Perpetrator's relationship to victim	91
Was violence gang-related	67
Victim's race	39
Perpetrator's race	39
Perpetrator's socio-economic status	28
Violence frequency in community	19
Presence/use of alcohol	14
Lost opportunities for victim	11
Presence/use of drugs	9
Costs to others in community	7
Family income lost	1
Medical costs	1
Court costs	1
Incarceration costs	1
Police costs	0

We did not tabulate context scores for the week of Columbine coverage because of the small number of episodic stories and tendency to break those stories into smaller articles focusing on single aspects of the violence.

Who gets to speak to the public?

Routine reporting of youth crimes was dominated by sources from the criminal justice system, most often police, but also prosecutors and defense attorneys. They were quoted in 77% of such stories. No other type of source was quoted in as many as half the stories. Such official sourcing is the easiest way to report on violence, but gives police and lawyers a disproportionate voice.

The next most quoted types of sources were the victim or his/her family or friends, and non-elected government officials, such as schoolteachers and administrators. Each of these groups was quoted in about one in three stories. Youthful sources, from all categories, spoke in 34% of these stories. Rarely heard were independent experts, health

professionals, issue advocates, and representatives of corporations or community-based, religious or social organizations. Routine sourcing was narrow—ignoring valuable viewpoints available in the community.

During the Columbine week, there was far less reliance on criminal justice sources. The reporting became more active, getting closer to the participants and witnesses of the violence. Twice as many stories contained quotes from youth. Witnesses became the most common sources. Politicians also were more prominent as reporters sought causes and policy solutions. The number of stories quoting independent experts and issue advocates also rose. The number of sources per story also jumped. Again, because the Columbine reports were so extensive that they were broken into separate stories on the same day, the percentage of stories in which a particular type of source appears was understated compared to routine coverage.

Most Frequently Quoted Sources[37]

In Year-long Sample	% of stories	Columbine sample	% of stories
Criminal justice	77	Witness/neighbor	52
Non-elected government	34	Criminal justice	45
Victim/family, friends	34	Non-elected government	34
Witness/neighbor	31	Politicians	29
Perpetrator/family, friends	25	Victim/family, friends	26
Politicians	21	Perpetrator/family, friends	25
% of stories with young sources	**34**		**55**

Least Frequently Quoted Sources

In Year-long Sample	% of stories	In the Littleton Sample	% of stories
Corporate	6	Corporate	8
Independent experts	11	Health professionals	10
Issue advocates	12	Community-based orgs.	12
Health professionals	12	Independent experts	14
Community-based orgs.	12	Issue advocates	14

Discussion

Our results show that journalists can and do provide the resources citizens need to make sense of youth violence after a highly unusual and shocking event such as the Columbine massacre. But they generally fail to provide such information for the more common acts of violence that represent a much greater threat to the integrity of society. Routine coverage of crime has improved since Graber's study a quarter century earlier, but only marginally.

The coverage we analyzed betrayed a sense that the public already understands crimes such as domestic violence, gang behavior, homicide, rape, assault, burglary, etc., so well it has little need for context, or for explanations of cause or solution. But an event such as Columbine requires both context and exploration of questions of "why" and "what can be done?"

Passive, police-blotter reporting on violence, or reports that capture the emotions of fear and loss, but neglect causes, social effects and solutions have an ideological component. Framing is not a one-way street. As Price and Tewksbury point out, readers come to stories with their own frames. To the extent that a culture blames individuals and exempts their environment from culpability for violence, these terse cause-less stories may activate a default frame of personal responsibility in the reader.[38] In fact, people in the U.S. are so prone to placing responsibility on the character of actors rather than on an interaction between character and environmental circumstances, social psychologists have named the tendency the FAE, or "fundamental attribution error".[39]

This individual-blame interpretation hides the well-documented contributions to violent behavior of concentrated poverty, inadequate schools, discrimination,

dysfunctional or abusive parents, exposure to violence, lack of police enforcement, negative peer influences, over-commercialization of liquor, easy access to drugs and weapons, and other environmental factors.[40] Unreported, these elements--most of which society can remedy-- have far less chance to make an impression on public consciousness.

The present study has several obvious limitations. First, it was limited to three large, respected newspapers in only one state. Second, while youth violence is an important politically-relevant issue, it's only one issue. The quality of reporting on other topics may reflect what we've learned about communicating better, or worse. Third, the historical comparison with Graber's work is inexact. There were some differences of sample and definition.

Notes

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[1] David Doi, "The Violence Reporting Project: A New Approach to Covering Crime" in *Nieman Reports* 52 (1998):35-36; S. Robert Lichter, & Linda. S. Lichter, "The Media at the Millennium: The Networks' Top Topics, Trends and Joke Targets of the 1990's," *Media Monitor 14*((4) (2000); Mike A. Males. *Framing Youth: 10 Myths About the Next Generation* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999); Paul Perrone & Meda Chesney-Lind, "Representations of Gangs and Delinquency: Wild in the Streets?" in *Social Justice 24*(4) (1997): 96-116.

[2] P. Torbet. & L. Syzmanski, *State Legislative Responses to Violent Juvenile Crime: 1996-97 Update* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998).

[3] Doris A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public* (NY: Praeger, 1980): 45.

[4] Doris A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public*, 73.

[5] Doris A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public*, 73.

[6] Vincent Price & David Tewksbury, "News Values and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing," ed. G. Barnett and F.J. Boster *Progress in Communication Sciences* (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997): 173-212.

[7] Vincent Price, David Tewksbury & Elizabeth Powers "Switching Trains of Thought: The Impact of News Frames on Readers' Cognitive Responses," *Communication Research 24*(5) (1997): 481-506.

[8] Vincent Price & David Tewksbury, "News Values and Public Opinion": 173-212.

[9] Field Poll. "Prop. 22 Still Running Ahead" (February 29, 2000), (San Francisco: The Field Institute).

[10] Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[11] Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, 5.

[12] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[13] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 35.

[14] W. Russell Neuman, Marilyn R. Just, & Ann N. Crigler *Common Knowledge: News and the construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[15] Joel Best, *Random Violence: How We Talk About New Crimes and New Victims* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), xii.
[16] Joel Best, *Random Violence*, 25.
[17] Renita Coleman & Esther Thorson "The Effects of News Stories that Put Crime and Violence into Context: Testing the Public Health Model of Reporting," Mass Communication and Society Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Conference, (Phoenix, AZ, 2000), 27.
[18] Steven M. Chermak, *Victims in the News: Crime and the American News Media* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).
[19] Lori Dorfman, Katie Woodruff, Vivian Chavez, & Lawrence Wallack, "Youth and Violence on Local Television News in California," *American Journal of Public Health 87*(8) (1997):1311-1316.
[20] Don Sneed, "How to Improve Crime Reporting," *Editor and Publisher* 118 (1985): 56.
[21] Jane Stevens, *Reporting on Violence: A Handbook for Journalists*. (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Media Studies Group, 1997).
[22] Daniel Riffe., Charles F. Aust, & Stephen R. Lacy, "The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis." *Journalism Quarterly 70*(1) (1993):133-139.
[23] Our principal funder, the California Wellness Foundation, established this age limit to define the term "young people".

[24] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication 43*(4) (1993):51-58.
[25] Robert M. Entman, "Framing": 52.
[26] Jane Stevens, *Reporting on Violence*.
[27] The greatest margin of error for these point estimates is plus or minus 1.7 percentage points at the .05 confidence level. For classification of stories by topic, intercoder agreement was .86, calculated using Scott's Pi, a statistic that corrects for chance agreement.
[28] Graber included *every* story in the paper while we focused on those displayed or promoted on section fronts and on editorial pages. In addition, we focused on violence; her lens also took in non-violent crime. Neither of these differences, however, would likely close such a large gap.
[29] Intercoder agreement, as measured with Scott's Pi, was .83. A chi-square test of difference between thematic and episodic frames in the yearlong sample, with one degree of freedom yields a statistic of 9.18, significant at the .01 confidence level. A second chi-square test of the difference between the yearlong sample and the actual count of stories in the week following Columbine yields a statistic of 21.2, significant at the .01 level with one degree of freedom.
[30] Intercoder agreement ranged from 1.0 to .84 using Scott's Pi. The largest margin of error around point estimates of frames in the yearlong sample is plus/minus 5 at the .05 confidence level. The Columbine week data are from a 100% sample, and thus free of sampling error.
[31] Scott's Pi ranged from 1.0 to .84. The largest margin of error around point estimates of frames in the yearlong sample is plus/minus 5 at the .05 confidence level.
[32] Scott's Pi equaled .74. The margin of error around the point estimate of the most common nature of the problem frame in the yearlong sample is plus/minus 9 at the .05 level.
[33] Jane Stevens, *Reporting on Violence*.
[34] Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Survey of State Prison Inmates1991* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1991).
[35] California Department of Justice, Crime and Delinquency in California, 1999, (Sacramento, CA: Division of Criminal Justice information Services, 1999).
[36] Scott's Pi ranged from 1.0 to .75 on all but the gang-related item, which was .68. Several other context items were dropped because of unacceptable reliability scores. These included how the weapon was obtained, the perpetrator's previous offenses, and whether hate or racism was implicated. The largest margin of error among context items was plus/minus 12 points at the .05 confidence level. The *n* comprised only episodic stories from the yearlong sample.
[37] Scott's Pi ranged from 1.0 to .83 for source categories. The largest margin of error for category estimates is plus/minus 10 points, at the 95% confidence level.

[38] Coleman and Thorson, "The Effects of News Stories that Put Crime and Violence into Context: Testing the Public Health Model of Reporting," 10.
[39] Lee Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings" in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 10* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).
[40] Linda L. Dahlberg, "Youth Violence in the United States: Major Trends, Risk Factors, and Prevention Approaches," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine 14*(4) (1998): 259-272.